



U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON

# Finance

SENATOR CHUCK GRASSLEY, OF IOWA - CHAIRMAN

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## Grassley says now is the time to improve 1-800-MEDICARE

WASHINGTON — Sen. Chuck Grassley says the government needs to do better job when it comes to providing accurate and helpful information to Medicare beneficiaries who call a toll-free Medicare assistance line.

"There's no time to waste in making improvements," Grassley said. "This help line will be an even more important resource for Medicare beneficiaries and their families a year from now, when the new voluntary prescription drug benefit becomes available. Medicare needs to improve the training of the customer service representatives who field the calls. The Medicare help line needs to live up to its name and be ready and able to provide reliable help to callers."

Grassley based his comments on the findings of a report released today by the Government Accountability Office. The report said callers to the government-sponsored 1-800-MEDICARE help line received inaccurate answers to questions about 30 percent of the time. The report said another 10 percent of callers didn't receive answers to questions because calls were either forwarded from the help line to administrative claims for staff who were not working at the time, or calls were disconnected. The report concluded that 61 percent of questions posed to the Medicare help line were answered correctly.

This review of the help line was mandated by the Medicare prescription drug legislation enacted a year ago. The Medicare help line is designed to answer calls 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The help line is staffed by customer service representatives employed by private contractors who are hired by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services, the federal agency that administers the Medicare program.

In today's report the Government Accountability Office recommended that Medicare 1) revise protocols so calls are not transferred to a call center that is closed; 2) assess current scripts and pretest new and revised scripts; 3) provide more testing of customer service representatives' ability to accurately answer questions and use the results to target training efforts; and 4) monitor accuracy rates for each frequently asked question and use the results to modify scripts and training if necessary.

Grassley urged Medicare to quickly implement the recommendations. He said that an

assistance line available to taxpayers through the Internal Revenue Service provides a model for Medicare. During the 2002 filing season, the Government Accountability Office found that callers to the IRS help line received correct responses to questions about the tax laws 85 percent of the time. Callers received correct responses about individual cases 91 percent of the time. "If the IRS can provide this level of customer service, Medicare should do so, too," Grassley said.

As chairman of the Senate Committee on Finance, Grassley is responsible for oversight of the Medicare program in addition to Medicare legislation. In 2003, he was the principal Senate sponsor of the Medicare Modernization Act, which created the first-ever Medicare prescription drug benefit.

The report of the Government Accountability Office is titled: Medicare: Accuracy of Responses from the 1-800-MEDICARE Help Line Should Be Improved. It is available online at [www.gao.gov](http://www.gao.gov). The report's reference number is GAO-05-130.